

## **Friday, August 17, 2007: Charrette Pin-up Session**

Tonight's session, Stuart Sirota noted, brings us slightly more than half way through the charrette process.

The goal of a pin-up session, he said, is to give the public the opportunity to critique his team's designs and ask questions. He and his team had been invited by the City to create a corridor master plan for the New Hampshire Corridor from Eastern Avenue to Sligo Creek Parkway. They were looking at the corridor from a comprehensive viewpoint, one that included not only building design, but also commerce and transportation.

The long-term goal is to make the area walkable, he said, adding that this transformation should not be expected to happen overnight. It will take the work of many to accomplish this goal. What is expressed in the Master Plan might be best seen as the end point of this process—what will be achieved over a process spanning ten, fifteen, even twenty years.

Sirota added that one should not expect that the final result will mirror the plan exactly. Also, if someone notices a building missing from a drawing, this should not be interpreted to mean that someone intends to take their building from them. Today is not the 1960s—"those days are long gone," Sirota said. No: these changes will happen over time by the natural workings of the marketplace. What the master plan creates is a framework within which these changes can unfold.

The pictures and concept drawings that will be shown tonight, Sirota said, are the fruit of comments accumulated from both the pin-up sessions and from a series of stakeholder meetings that have been happening since Tuesday. In order to make the new conceptual design pictures more easily visible, they would this time be projected on a large screen as he spoke.

### *Transportation changes*

The first slide put up was the cover of *The Boulevard Book*, by Allan Jacobs. "This is one of my Bibles," Sirota said. It has become clear to the team that New Hampshire Avenue needs to be changed into a "great boulevard." True, New Hampshire carries a lot of traffic—and at peak hours this volume of traffic is large; at the same time, these 'peak hours' occupy a fairly small percentage of the total time this road is used.

Sirota explained that he was using the word 'boulevard' as shorthand for what more properly is termed a 'multi-way boulevard,' a kind of street which has been around for more than a hundred years. Examples in the United States of the multi-way boulevard can be found, for example, at Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn. By definition, such roads carry from one to three lanes of traffic in each direction, with each direction separated by a central median; two additional median strips separate the main flows of traffic from side lanes carrying slower traffic. Finally, this slower side lane is separated from the sidewalk

by parked cars. Trees are typically planted on all the medians and also along the main sidewalk itself. Over time, buildings oriented to, and flush with the sidewalk are added, thereby completing the picture of the multi-way boulevard (MWB).

The charrette team is working in the studio to design this street, and though they believe it should be a feature of this corridor, they do not feel it is absolutely necessary that the MWB concept be extended through the entire length of New Hampshire Avenue—its presence will be most needed at those points where one wants in the near term to create centers of walkability. Within the current design framework, Sirota added, this means that the MWB should be present within the Maryland Gateway area beginning at Eastern Avenue, and again at the Ethan Allen Gateway area. He then put on the screen a drawing of a transformed New Hampshire Avenue. The drawing included both the new multi-way look of the street and new mixed-use buildings with ground-floor retail. “You can see,” Sirota said, “that it changes the whole character of the area.” It becomes far easier to cross the street, because the distances become much shorter

At this point an audience member asked Sirota whether the MWB could truly be narrowed to four lanes instead of six. The questioner added that some years ago similar discussions stirred a fair amount of interest locally, and even led to some discussions with the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA). The SHA appeared to be against the four-lane concept, and in the end the whole matter was put on hold.

Sirota replied that the whole charrette team strongly felt that it was worth pushing to create a MWB with four through lanes. In support of this approach, he added, the team’s research has shown that traffic volumes are in fact gradually decreasing over time on New Hampshire. According to SHA data, both peak and average daily traffic volumes are decreasing—an interesting trend. In all likelihood it will still, he acknowledged, be an uphill battle, and will require support from some folks at the highest levels. All the same, he said, “We think it is time to really push.” The Master Plan could be used to support that push. To be sure, Sirota pointed out, a MWB is also possible with 6 through lanes. But one really needs a wider roadway for that (about 130 to 150 feet, which is wider than what is currently available).

There followed a discussion of a variety of options. How wide should the medians be? In which lane would the buses run? Should parking be parallel or angled, and where, if at all, would be the best spot for a bike lane? The pluses and minuses of these various options and decisions will have to be carefully weighed by the community.

Returning to the bigger picture, Sirota said that the team was now thinking in terms of four commercial nodes in the area under discussion, and had, for the sake of illustration only, assigned some very tentative names to them. The MWB concept would, presumably, apply to each of these nodes, though on-street parking would become the norm for the whole length of the Corridor, as would sidewalks and trees along the roadway.

The northern-most node would be anchored, at least initially, by a sort of roadhouse or family-style pub located at the south-west quadrant of Sligo Creek and New Hampshire. The socializing made possible by such an 'anchor' was, in fact, part of the overall intent of the new plan. Many in the community had earlier commented that they wanted a café. In fact, Sirota said, there is a general lack of quality places for people to meet one another outdoors. He noted that, at the Takoma Langley Crossroads, for example, people were continually being chased away for 'loitering'; and yet, he said, many of those being chased away were simply bringing to our area the habits of places where being outside just to see people is part of the culture. At present, however, there is nowhere to do this. The charrette team is working on changing this picture.

At the new commercial node on New Hampshire near Route 410, which the team is (tentatively) calling 'International Market,' the intent is to create squares or plazas, and an outdoor international bazaar. This pattern would eventually be mirrored on both the east and west sides of New Hampshire. The treatment of the street would ensure that crossing from one side to the other would not be a matter of concern. At the south-west corner of Ethan Allen and New Hampshire there would be a signature building and a café.

At Eastern Avenue, the street would have mixed-use buildings with street-level retail and upper-story offices and housing. The potential for commercial development here is greater, Sirota noted, than one might think. Bear in mind, he said, that the Bank of America building has three hundred businesses, most of them small, and immigrant owned. That might mean a thousand people coming and going each day, and potentially having lunch at new businesses in the area. Plus there are the people already living in the area. He showed a slide showing the re-designed look of the street, and showing, for purposes of illustration (looking north on the street from the direction of Eastern Ave.), a signature building on the left. Building height was assumed to be three to four stories.

Team member and environmental urbanist Kathy Poole then described her own vision for the site at Sligo Creek featuring the proposed family pub house. The basic idea can be described as follows. The pub will in the first instance create a much-needed social gathering place. Beyond that function, though complementary to it, the surrounding land parcel (which is wooded, and in places quite steep) will be transformed into a beautiful garden; it will become a storm-water treatment area for Sligo Creek (aiding thereby in its restoration); and it will also become a place where one can climb the steps of a boardwalk to get a view of the area. Having turned this property into a destination, one thereby also encourages the use of Sligo Creek Parkway as a more important transportation corridor (using all modes of transport, including bicycle).

Moving beyond this site to the wider area, but continuing with her theme of storm water treatment, Poole showed how New Hampshire Avenue itself can become a means to the same end if one re-builds it in such a way that it doubles as an infiltration system. Furthermore, the easement under the hi-power electric lines (that extend to the east of New Hampshire) can also be used toward this same end, and in a somewhat similar fashion, through the use of appropriate plantings and so forth, thereby beautifying this

entire area—which goal Poole sees as far more realistic than imaging it might be possible to do away with, or put underground, the existing wires.

Before throwing the meeting open to questions and comments, Stuart Sirota quickly added that the team was recommending the addition of a new street grid at the junction of East-West Highway and New Hampshire in order to take some of the pressure off of that intersection.

### *Questions and Comments*

The first questioner wanted to know—particularly given that several team members came from such far-away places as Kansas City, Missouri—how this particular charrette team was assembled. Sirota said that they knew each other from other meetings all around the country, and that it was his practice to assemble a group whose skills matched the needs of a given assignment. Kathy Poole said she thought it was a plus that they argued a lot among themselves—a process she felt was a good way to get to a compromise that works well for a city.

Several questioners voiced concerns about the changes in the street grid, including at the Maryland Gateway (near Eastern Ave.), and how this might end up putting more traffic into the residential areas.

Replies came from several team members. One noted that most (if not all) of the new grid would move through existing commercial areas, including what is now the rear of such buildings. Another pointed out that ‘transportation’ does not mean just cars—they want to see more pedestrians and cyclists using the new street grid. Furthermore, the increased number of connections will serve to diffuse traffic. As for ‘traffic-calming’ measures, Rick Hall said that good design at the outset would generally make the use of such measures unnecessary. Hall urged local residents to give the proposed more interconnected street grid pattern a chance—to find out, *empirically*, what happens. If this or that particular street creates problems, one can easily make adjustments on a case-by-case basis. The same holds true for the multi-way boulevard. That a MWB is capable of enormous traffic-calming is proven, Poole pointed out, by looking at pedestrian behaviors in such boulevards as Octavia in San Francisco or the many examples in Spain, where one sometimes even sees mothers pushing a baby carriage down the side access lanes (when the sidewalk is too crowded) of multi-way boulevards!

An audience member then spoke up to voice her enthusiasm for the team’s ideas, including that of the pub. She said she had lived for many years in England, and felt that Takoma Park was already the closest thing in the Washington area to an English village. She commented that her English in-laws spend three or four hours socializing every Friday night in their local pub, as it is the heart of their community.

She also asked about where buses would be in the multi-way boulevard. Rick Hall, the team transportation engineer, said that there are several models for bus location – one being in the center through lanes adjacent to a center median, a second being in the center

through lanes adjacent to the side medians, and the other being in the access lanes. As buses in the access lanes would mean wider (and therefore faster) vehicle speeds in the access lanes, and median loaded buses required more space in the median and special buses, they recommended loading on the side medians from the through lanes.

The final part of the question was about roundabouts – as while they are effective in the UK but would US drivers would be able to navigate them as effectively? and would be like the ones at Kentlands, MD, where she had seen drivers not knowing who had the right of way? Kathy Poole said, yes, similar to Kentlands, however, had the audience noticed that while the roundabout may be confusing for drivers unfamiliar with it, traffic was slow enough that there had never been an accident.

The next questioner worried aloud about the fate of immigrant businesses at the re-developed area at Route 410. Would the current immigrant businesses be able to afford staying after the area is redeveloped?

It depends, the questioner was told, on how the development occurs and how the market develops. The idea of having an outdoor bazaar or street market is very appealing. But as for more formal business spaces, there are ways to structure incentives to the developer to in effect subsidize the rent for certain types of businesses.

A follow-up questioner asked whether such affordability considerations would be part of the team's report. Yes, they would, the questioner was told. As for affordable housing, one team member said, there is already a fair bit of such housing in the area, and it could definitely continue to be a component of the mixed-use buildings contemplated for the corridor. At the same time, said Randall Gross, the team's market analyst, one actually wants to see a mixture of incomes in an area to ensure its vitality. Paul Grenier added that--as is made clear on the city's charrette web site (see the section titled 'mixed use and mixed income' on the 'built structures and housing' page)--there are already good examples of excellent mixed-use buildings that include affordable housing, and we have in the DC Metro area developers who specialize in doing just that.

There followed a whole series of questions on transportation, focusing on buses, bikes, and which lanes would be best for the various modes. Perhaps the most important point raised during this discussion was this: to the extent that car speeds can be kept to the 30 mph speed as the top range—as is desirable on a multi-way boulevard—the main lanes of transport might well be able to accommodate bicycles. Though cars move more slowly on the side lanes of the MWB, opening doors from parked cars create a hazard to cyclists. One solution could be allowing for a bike lane on the left side of such a lane. Another possible solution would be 'back-in only' angled parking. The team was very reluctant to do away with cars parked on the side of the MWB—including for economic reasons. They referred to the statistic from retail expert and town planner Robert Gibbs that each on-street parking place means at least \$200,000 *per annum* in increased gross revenues for adjacent businesses. The removal of such parking from streets in recent decades has been very damaging to local businesses.

Stimulated by a question concerning the addition a trolley car line along New Hampshire, the team described a range of mass transit options, including a loop line that would connect existing and soon-to-be-developed mass transit nodes. Hall, the team's traffic engineer, noted that there are a hundred communities in the U.S. right now that are looking at putting in trolley systems. Trolleys are on the up-swing.

Is all this new development really going to express, and enhance, the cultural identity of Takoma Park? That was the question raised by another resident, who sounded very skeptical that it would. "I realize," he said, "that this is not a fast process, and I have heard the words culture and identity mentioned—but I thought Takoma Park already had it." What this resident saw planned for New Hampshire reminded him of Washington, D.C. And yet, he said, "I thought Takoma Park was an escape from D.C. I see [in the new plans] an extension of D.C." Finally, he asked, what will be the impact of the new plans on the "heart" of Takoma Park, which, he said, is the place you go to take walks today. Given the discussion of new markets opening up around the Bank of America building, what, he concluded, will we be doing to the viability of the existing central core of Takoma Park?

Sirota replied that he felt that New Hampshire was, to the contrary, a weak link in the viability of Takoma Park. The goal is not to add competition to the established centers, but to add a new element. The 'new' would not be a copy of what exists. The idea is to extend the vibrant walkable areas that already exist (at the City's core) into an edge zone that does not at all reflect that walkability. What is more, by developing New Hampshire, the town would be taking advantage of practically the only opportunity it has to 'capture' the market of pass-through travelers—and successful businesses depend on capturing bigger markets. The old town is one kind of specialty market, Sirota continued, adding that he didn't think that it would be in competition for exactly the same people.

Continuing their answer to the questioner's doubts, team members wondered aloud what would be the options—in a future that may well see gas prices rise to \$12 a gallon—to residents of those American suburbs that fail to transform themselves into sustainable, walkable communities and economies? ("They'll all buy scooters," interjected Randy Gross, nodding toward the local businessman in the audience who owns a scooter and motorbike repair shop.) By contrast those who live in sustainable communities will simply say: "Should I walk, bike, or take the bus today?" The charrette team's proposed new structure would have such options, while "SUV-ville won't."

One audience member said that it so happens that poorer people are also often in the position of having to commute. Can we put low-income people into these buildings, she asked? Randall said that mixed-use housing could indeed simultaneously be mixed income.

Another questioner, after noting that she loved the team's ideas, asked why one wouldn't want to put bike lanes down the medians of the MWB. Poole voiced reservations about the idea, to the extent, at least, that the design of such lanes would interfere with the

installation of permeable surfaces on medians to assist with rain-water infiltration systems.

Takoma Park Mayor Kathy Porter noted that, as it stands now, there is no protection from cars at all for pedestrians on New Hampshire. She likes the idea of development on a “human scale,” creating places where people can walk, places where there are restaurants. She felt that the plan pointed less to a big-city environment, and more to something on the scale of the new downtown Silver Spring.

Another questioner voiced concerns about whether three-story buildings could provide the density that the area needed. He noted that the core areas of Takoma Park were not dense. He also voiced the opinion that the provision of affordable housing should be simply “a given” in any new plans.

In the view of the charrette team, three to five stories as the design limit for this particular section of New Hampshire seemed appropriate. They also noted that well-designed buildings, even if limited to five stories, can provide quite a bit of density—and even equal that of much higher buildings that surround themselves with surface parking. What is more, there are already buildings, such as the Belford Towers, and others within a block or two of New Hampshire, that already provide a fair bit of density. At the Crossroads, by contrast, higher buildings may well be more appropriate.

City Council member Colleen Clay offered the following assessment. Before wondering about whether the proposals were going to change Takoma Park, she said, one needs to be aware that in any case Takoma Park is already changing—right now. If one looks at the problem of affordable housing, for example, she sees the development of the corridor as an opportunity to expand the tax base without raising taxes. At present, some people are feeling forced to move away as taxes go up. In the core areas of Takoma Park, there is little room for creating new units.

At the same time, continued councilmember Clay, it is important to protect the diversity of existing businesses. The City must make a commitment to ensuring that local businesses stay involved and get the information they need—including regarding what markets exist in their walking shed areas—to be positioned to profit from opportunities both now and, with new developments, as they become available over time.

As the evening wound to an end, Stuart Sirota expressed the view that a third pin-up session on Saturday did not appear to be necessary. He said the team seemed to be on roughly the right track, and that it would keep working through the weekend and be ready to make its next and final presentation to the public at large on Monday evening.

But before the crowd dispersed, a final question was raised regarding how the charrette process fits into the Master Plan for the city, and whether the city’s vision would, in fact, be enforceable. Takoma Park senior planner Ilona Blanchard said that there exists a memorandum of agreement between the Montgomery County planning board and the city. This agreement extends to the city an active role in the approval process, assuming

that the city is acting in a way that can be shown to enjoy the support of the community. In the final analysis, Blanchard continued, the new plan being developed here will indeed be 'enforceable'— as proposals are made, and properties redevelop, it is important that the community shows up in sufficient numbers to review them with the goals of the plan in mind.

PRG. Saturday, August 18, 2007 11:00 p.m.